

# Surveillance

Does it matter who knows our personal information?

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**“The Internet is the most liberating tool for humanity ever invented, and also the best for surveillance. It’s not one or the other. It’s both.”**

John Perry Barlow,  
cyber rights activist

**Y**ou are being watched. Almost everything you do online is tracked. Your personal details, web searches and browsing history are routinely collected. Emails, mobile phone calls and text messages are monitored, your social networking habits retained, your transactions logged. Your physical location is easy to determine thanks to smartphones with built-in GPS.

Governments and corporations harvest huge amounts of information, building up detailed profiles about us for a range of purposes. Some people are concerned about mass surveillance, believing it to be a dangerous breach of privacy. Others accept it as justified and reasonable. Others still may be uncomfortable about it, but believe there is little they can do.

For Christians, are there biblical principles that can help inform our response to issues of privacy and mass surveillance?



**Thinking Biblically About...**

# What's the problem?

Faced with revelations about the extent of surveillance, online and offline, it can be difficult to know how to react. Christians in particular may believe that if they're not doing anything wrong, they don't have anything to worry about. Yet both the level of surveillance and the nature of those who collect information about us suggests that this is not the case. There are broadly three groups who seek to collect our personal data:

- **Governments.** Leaked documents show that government agencies in the US and UK have been collecting and sharing enormous quantities of personal information, without any form of public consultation or approval.
- **Corporations.** Search engines, social networks and other applications collect information about their users' complete browsing habits, often whether they are logged in or not.
- **Hackers.** Information is regularly stolen for illegal purposes such as fraud and identity theft.






However, these are not distinct groups. More and more, governments are requesting and receiving information from large companies like Facebook and Google. The public sector often contracts work out to the private sector, blurring the lines further. Data is not always secured properly, and there have been high-profile thefts from both governments and businesses. Then there are the rogue governments that exploit security loopholes and plant software to carry out cyber warfare. Security agencies develop new tools to monitor internet traffic, and these are gradually appropriated by hackers and other third parties.

All of these suggest that we should never assume it is safe to give away our personal information – and yet this is exactly what many of us do. Moreover, the profusion of surveillance, online and offline, has spiritual as well as practical consequences.

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Q: Are you concerned about the level of online surveillance by different groups? Why/why not?

## Surveillance statistics

	<b>31,698</b>	Personal data requests made by governments to Google in January-June 2014 (up from 12,538 in July-December 2009)
	<b>5 MILLION</b>	CCTV cameras in the UK (up from 1.85 million in 2011)
	<b>26 MILLION</b>	Images taken daily by road traffic cameras in the UK
	<b>500 MILLION</b>	Gmail users – all of whose emails are scanned
	<b>3 BILLION</b>	Phone calls logged by the NSA in America every day

# Knowledge and Power

Governments justify mass surveillance on the grounds that it enables them to prevent acts of terrorism and take action against organised crime. There is a debate about how effective wholesale harvesting of personal information is in this respect, but another aspect of the debate is that there is a presumption of guilt: everyone is monitored, regardless of whether they have done anything wrong or not. We can only be at ease with this process if we believe the government in question is and will remain benign, and that it will not pass on information to other governments that are not.

Companies collect our data for various reasons. It may be to target advertising more effectively. It may be to adjust the prices of the products we are offered on the basis of our browsing histories and profiles – this is

standard practice in some industries. Data may be sold on to third parties, with or without our consent. It may be made available to different governments, some of which are less concerned about freedom, democracy and due process.

Knowledge is power. Gathering information in these quantities enables the collector to predict our behaviour with surprising accuracy – and to influence it. Surveillance raises the issue that decisions are taken about us, but we are not a party to those decisions. It gives others the ability to control us to a greater or lesser extent. The collection of personal data by governments, corporations and individuals is ultimately a matter of our freedom. Whilst this is problematic for anyone, for Christians it has even greater significance.

Privacy	vs	Anonymity
The ability to do something away from the eyes of others		The ability to do something publicly and openly, without anyone knowing who is doing it
<b>Examples:</b> closing the curtains, holding a private conversation, encrypting emails and other documents		<b>Examples:</b> voting, whistleblowing, sending a letter in an unmarked envelope



# What does the Bible say?

**The world of the Bible is very different to our modern, industrial and highly connected society. All the same, the Bible's teachings are still relevant to questions of mass surveillance, privacy and anonymity.**

## Centralised power

The Bible is extremely wary about centralised power. As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites were oppressed by a Pharaoh who was viewed as god and who had absolute control over his people.



*'Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came*

*to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.'*

(Exodus 1:8-14)

After the Exodus, when they settled in Canaan, the Israelites' own structures of power were to be more decentralised, with limits on the power of the king, who was subject to the law and prevented from accumulating possessions and military power of his own.



*'When the king takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left.'*

(Deuteronomy 17:18-20)





The economy was structured in such a way as to prevent entrenched inequalities, through the ban on interest, periodic cancellation of debts and return of land to its original owners every 50 years (see Leviticus 25).

## “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Lord Acton,  
19th century politician  
and writer

The Israelites repeatedly experienced the abuses of concentrated political power in the course of their history, being invaded and exiled by the Assyrians and Babylonians. In the New Testament the Jews and early Christians were subject to the Romans, who exacted heavy taxes and did not allow them the freedom to practise their own religion.

Unlike the surrounding nations, the Israelites’ only absolute authority was God. Concentration of power in human hands was avoided by diffusing political responsibility throughout society, down to the level of local communities wherever possible.

From our perspective, any organisation, whether state or corporate, that has the will and resources to conduct mass surveillance represents a concentration of financial, political and technological power that the Bible considers inherently dangerous. These organisations are often secretive, hard to engage with and effectively beyond accountability.

## Manipulation

Knowledge is power, and gaining information about others allows the collector a degree of control over them. This happens outside of any direct relationship with them, and outside of any relationship with God. In the Bible, there are repeated warnings against divination and witchcraft – seeking to gain information and control over events and people by deception and manipulation, and without God, rather than through open communication and honest relationship. This is absolutely forbidden, not least because it is a form of idolatry.



*‘For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.’  
(1 Samuel 15:23)*

The influence and control that is gained over people, without their consultation or consent, by secretive and deceptive surveillance practices, could be considered a modern-day secular version of witchcraft.

**Q:** In spiritual and practical terms, why is it dangerous to give others control over us?

In the past, much of this surveillance has happened without our knowledge, until details were leaked from intelligence agencies. However, in other cases we are perfectly happy to give up our personal information. Often we are not overly concerned to manage the privacy settings for social networks, and other third-party applications that use them to register us for their services – gaining access to our details and photos in the process. We choose weak passwords and reuse them, despite the security issues we know this raises. We download apps and software without researching their safety. We uncritically accept surveillance by large corporations, because this is the price of using the services they offer – which are otherwise free.

Asked whether it was acceptable to pay taxes to the Romans, Jesus implied that Caesar – the state – had a legitimate but limited claim on us. 'Give back to Caesar what is

Caesar's and to God what is God's' (Mark 12:17). In colluding with mass surveillance, we are allowing others to gain a huge amount of information about us, enabling them to build up detailed profiles about almost everything we do. We are voluntarily giving away our freedoms. By not resisting this loss of privacy, we allow Caesar to take the place of God. We also have no idea where these changes – often small and subtle when taken in isolation – will lead.

The spiritual significance of this is that our autonomy is compromised, with our tacit consent. As Christians, our understanding of our humanity is informed by the freedom that Christ gave us through his sacrifice on the cross. But we are losing incrementally the ability to act according to conscience: our actions imply that the right to browse the web and communicate with each other is more important than our own freedom.



# Where do we go from here?

There are a number of steps we can take to protect our privacy and anonymity, online and off. Some of this is just common sense – good practice in choosing passwords, downloading software, signing up for services and being careful with the information we give away or make public. There is also free and relatively straightforward software we can use to encrypt emails and browse the web without our actions and personal information being recorded.

However, it's important to recognise that technology does not provide all the answers. Technology may help prevent some of the worst abuses and intrusion into our lives, but they do not change the attitude of the heart that leads to organisations seeking to gain access to this information. We can be messianic about technology, believing that it can fix problems that are really about our relationships with God and each other.

As Christians, we are called to resist evil but instructed to submit to authority, so long as this does not conflict with our loyalty to God (Romans 13:1-5). Generally, at least in the Western world, maintaining our privacy

from state and corporate surveillance will not entail breaking any laws – though this does not mean it will not have implications or carry personal costs.

Alongside any individual measures we take, we should engage with the authorities as much as is possible. Online rights and civil liberties groups campaign and raise awareness of surveillance practices and the erosion of our freedoms. We may choose to support these as well as using the political process to make our voices heard.

Finally, greater anonymity online brings temptations as well as freedoms. There are repeated warnings in the Bible that sins committed in secret are seen by God and will be made known.



*'There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.'*

(Luke 12:2-3)

In seeking to escape one evil, we must be careful not to be ensnared by others.

**Q:** How might you change your online habits to protect your privacy better?

# What does the **Bible** tell us about **Surveillance**?



- We often accept mass surveillance as an unavoidable part of modern life
- The Bible is highly cautious about the concentration of power inherent in any organisation capable of mass surveillance
- When we allow others to gather personal information that can be used to influence and control us, we give up some of the freedom won for us by Christ's sacrifice.

**Thinking Biblically About...** is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government is.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

**The Jubilee Centre** is a Christian social reform organisation based in Cambridge, UK. We believe that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

**Find out more at [www.jubilee-centre.org/surveillance](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/surveillance)**